

## Facebook Disables Access for NYU Research Into Political-Ad Targeting

Researchers say the data provided information on misinformation in political ads; Facebook says the work violated its terms of service



The NYU Ad Observatory recruited more than 6,500 volunteers to use a special browser extension to collect data about the political ads Facebook shows them. PHOTO: ERIK MCGREGOR/PACIFIC PRESS/ZUMA PRESS

By Meghan Bobrowsky

Updated Aug. 4, 2021 5:54 pm ET

Facebook Inc. disabled a New York University research project's accounts and access to the platform, effectively shutting down a study of the social-media giant's targeting of political ads.

The NYU Ad Observatory, launched last September by the university's engineering school, recruited more than 6,500 volunteers to use a special browser extension to collect data about the political ads Facebook shows them. Soon after, Facebook, which hadn't given permission for the project, demanded the researchers cease collecting the data.

On Tuesday, Facebook disabled the accounts, apps, Facebook pages and platform access associated with the project and its operators.

"NYU's Ad Observatory project studied political ads using unauthorized means to access and collect data from Facebook, in violation of our Terms of Service," Mike Clark, Facebook's product management

director, said in a statement posted to the company's website Tuesday. Facebook, he said, moved to stop unauthorized scraping and to comply with an agreement the company entered into with the U.S. government to address past privacy missteps.

Mr. Clark said the project's browser extension was programmed to evade Facebook's detection systems and scrape data including usernames, ads, links to user profiles and "Why am I seeing this ad?" information—some of which isn't publicly viewable on the site by other users. The extension also gathered data about users who didn't install it or consent to its collection, Mr. Clark said.

One of the disabled accounts belonged to Laura Edelson, a doctoral candidate in computer science at the engineering school and the lead researcher behind NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy, which operates the Ad Observatory. Two other researchers also had their accounts suspended, a Facebook representative said.

"The work our team does to make data about disinformation on Facebook transparent is vital to a healthy internet and a healthy democracy," Ms. Edelson said in a written statement to The Wall Street Journal. She said that Facebook was using privacy as a pretext, and that it shouldn't have veto power over who studies the platform.

A spokesman for Facebook declined to comment on Ms. Edelson's remarks and pointed to Mr. Clark's post on the matter. Mr. Clark said the company offers researchers a number of privacy-protective methods to collect and analyze data. "We welcome research that holds us accountable, and doesn't compromise the security of our platform or the privacy of the people who use it," he said in his post Tuesday.

Amid a wave of criticism about the opaque nature of political advertising in the 2016 presidential campaign, Facebook launched an archive of advertisements that runs on its platform, with information such as who paid for an ad, when it ran and the geographic location of people who saw it. That library excludes information about the targeting that determines who sees the ads.

The researchers behind the NYU Ad Observatory previously said they wanted to make it possible for journalists, researchers, policy makers and others to search political ads by state and contest to see what messages are directed to specific audiences and how those ads are funded.



Facebook's independent oversight board said in May that the company was justified when it banned former President Trump following the Jan. 6 Capitol attack, but gave Facebook six months to decide on a permanent ban. WSJ's Brad Reagan explains what comes next. Photo: Andre M. Chang/Zuma Press

Facebook's action Tuesday drew fire from Democrat Senator Mark R. Warner of Virginia, a longtime critic of the company. He said in a statement that Facebook should empower independent researchers, whose efforts have improved the integrity of social media platforms. "Instead, Facebook has seemingly done the opposite," he said Wednesday, adding that Congress should move to increase transparency in online advertising.

Sen Amy Klobuchar (D., Minn.), who last month introduced a bill that would strip online platforms of their liability protections if their technology spreads misinformation related to public-health emergencies, said Wednesday that she was deeply troubled by Facebook's actions. "It is vital that social media companies both protect user data and improve transparency," she said.

Facebook didn't immediately respond to a request for comment about the two Senators' statements.

The social-media platform last month was in the White House's crosshairs for vaccine misinformation. President Biden said some of that information was "killing people." Facebook had previously said it had taken aggressive steps against the people the administration blamed for spreading vaccine falsehoods on the platform.